



Hernandez Reaches for the Stars



Mexican-American astronaut José Hernández spent 15 days on a NASA mission to the International Space Station in 2009. Hernández started a summer program to interest young people in technology, engineering and math careers. *AP Images*

Many people reach for the stars, but few get as close to them as José Hernández.

In 2009, the NASA engineer spent 15 days in space on a Discovery space shuttle mission to the International Space Station.

The trip to space represented a long journey for Mexican-American Hernández, who as

a child picked strawberries in California with his family. When his parents settled in Stockton, California, Hernández focused on doing well in school.

His interest in space was sparked while in high school when he learned that Costa Rica-born Franklin Chang Díaz, who ultimately flew on seven space missions, had become the first

Hispanic American chosen by NASA for astronaut training.

Hernández earned a master's degree in electrical and computer engineering and then worked for 14 years at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. There he co-developed the first full-field digital mammography imaging system capable of detecting breast cancer

at an earlier stage than had been possible previously.

While that achievement may not be as glamorous as space travel, it is his greatest, Hernandez believes. “It made me feel that I was making an impact on society,” he said.

Hernandez joined NASA in 2001. In addition to his stint as an astronaut, he worked as a material research engineer and supervisor.

In 2005, Hernandez formed the Reaching for the Stars Foundation, a nonprofit organization that conducts summer math and science academies and space conferences for primary school students.

The goal is to interest children in future careers in science, technology, engineering and math. “Those are the careers that are going to move our country forward in innovation,” he said.

Astronauts Still Needed

Despite the end of the U.S. space shuttle program, there will be plenty of opportunities for boys and girls who dream of being an astronaut, according to Hernandez.

NASA has plans for developing new space vehicles, he said, “and now the commercial industry is developing new vehicles for commercial space travel, which means that they’re going to need commercial astronauts.”

In January 2011, Hernandez left NASA to join MEI Technologies Inc. in Houston. The company offers engineering, information technology and cyber security services to public and private sector customers



José Hernández gestures during a speech in Mexico City. Before becoming an astronaut, Hernandez helped develop an imaging system that could detect breast cancer at earlier stages than previously possible — an achievement he regards as his greatest. *AP Images*

in aerospace, defense, optical and biotechnology markets worldwide.

As executive director for strategic operations, Hernandez focuses on business opportunities involving Latin countries.

His message to young people everywhere no matter what their circumstances: “Don’t be afraid of hard work,” he said. “Get yourself a good education. ... Anything is possible with a good education.”